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ABSTRACT

The development of effective skills and basic competencies in written English for Ute students in a reservation public school system and adult Ute learners seeking high school equivalency certificates is discussed. The focus of analysis is on assessing the Ute students' assumptions about written language and their use of those assumptions when doing different writing tasks. The following issues are considered: connections drawn between the "body" of written work and the title; the extent to which Ute student English essays comply with the terms of the assignment; strategies that Ute students use to organize and arrange ideas on paper; criteria that help students decide how much detail to include in their compositions; and the extent to which Ute students' writing strategies and their written work resemble the strategies and work of their non-Indian classmates. Illustrations from Ute English compositions are presented. Several conclusions are reached: (1) written Ute English compositions contain a high degree of structure, form, and organization; (2) Ute students' use of this style of written English resembles the students' use of English in other classroom domains; (3) written Ute English not only resembles oral Ute English usage, but also parallels the patterns of oral discourse found within the students' ancestral language tradition; and (4) the tribal government, parents, and school authorities agree that improvement of written English skills needs to be a priority in the education of Ute Indian students. Contains 10 references. (LB)

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Written Ute English: Texture, Construction, and Point of View

William Leap

A central element of effective language education for American Indian students is the development of effective skills and basic competencies in written English. I have been concerned about this topic for some time, largely as an outgrowth of my continuing study of the use of oral English in various tribes and as a response to needs of Ute students not adequately being met by the public school system on the Northern Ute reservation and the needs of adult Ute learners seeking GED (high school equivalency) certificates.[1]

Earlier, I approached the study of written Ute by searching for parallels to the features of pronunciation and grammar found in the writers' spoken English. For example, did the rule governing vowel devoicing in oral Ute English have any effects on written Ute English spelling patterns? Did oral Ute English use of multiple tense-marking to mark references to speculative or hypothetical situations also govern the arrangement of tense-sequences within written Ute English? My research uncovered numerous instances of

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[1]This paper is a revision of sections of a longer essay, "Pathways and Barriers to Literacy-building on the Northern Ute Reservation," presented at the November, 1987, meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago, Illinois, and at the April, 1988 Conference on Linguistics and Literacy at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. I want to thank Dan McLaughlin, Sonia Manuel-Dupont, Judy Lewis, Ellen Berner, Donna Budani, the staff of the Ute Family English Literacy Program, and participants in the 1989 Summer Ute Language Institute -- all of whom provided useful comments on this analysis.

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such parallels, and these findings helped the Northern Ute tribe's family literacy program identify more clearly the educational issues which needed to be addressed.

However, there was a lot more going on in written Ute English remaining to be accounted for. In order to develop satisfactory explanations, I broadened the focus of analysis to assess the Ute students' assumptions about written language and their use of those assumptions when doing different writing tasks. Hence my work with written Ute English, while still concerned with details of word structure and the order of underlying phrases and clauses, also pays attention to the following issues:

1. What connections do Ute students draw between the "body" of their written work and the title? What differences will there be if the title is included in the teacher's assignment in contrast to the student choosing their own title?
2. To what extent do Ute student English essays comply with the terms of the assignment? To what extent do these essays emphasize the writer's own concerns, regardless of the assignment's expectations?
3. What strategies do Ute students use to organize and arrange ideas on paper? Do they use formal outline, chronological description, arbitrary, random inventory, stream-of-consciousness display and the like? What factors lead individual students to favor one strategy over another?
4. What are the criteria which help students decide how much detail to include in (or exclude from) their compositions? Is there any consistency among Ute students as a whole in the use of such criteria, or are these decisions made on individual grounds?
5. To what extent do Ute students' writing strategies and their written work resemble the strategies and work of their non-Indian classmates?

These are student-centered concerns. Working in terms of a student-centered perspective proved very helpful in exploring student uses of English within a variety of

classroom related language situations, for example in oral English question asking and answering (Leap, 1989), story telling and even narration (Berner, 1988, 1989; Manuel-Dupont, 1990); mathematics word problem-solving (Leap, 1988), paper-and-pencil test-taking (Leap, in press). The perspective also offers important insights into the cultural and social barriers preventing fuller acceptance of a written Ute language and Ute language literacy (Leap, in press).

Preliminary comparisons of these findings show that, while the details of the task may differ, Ute student assumptions about appropriate and effective language use are actually quite similar across individual tasks. This suggests the possibility of creating a data-based, culturally sensitive description of Ute student "knowledge of language" (and ultimately, perhaps, "knowledge of knowledge"), and then tracing the implications of that perspective on Ute student school performance and school success. Work toward that goal is well underway (Leap, in press).

Illustrations from Ute English compositions

A selection of Ute English compositions from samples collected from Northern Ute fourth graders in 1984 illustrate insights which can come from a student-centered analysis of written Indian English.[1] All these compositions were written in classroom settings either in response to scheduled writing assignments or as activities undertaken at my request during "free-time" periods.

Example A powerfully reflects one of the most visually significant elements of the autumn season in northeastern Utah. The high Unitahs, a mountain chain reaching 11,000 feet or higher, dominates the northern boundary of the

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[1]The three compositions discussed here suggest some of the approaches guiding Ute students as they create written English texts. There are other approaches, some which show up in the written English of these students' non-Indian classmates. Others occur, as in the examples discussed here, almost exclusively in Ute English texts. Whether these features occur in the writing of Indian students in other schools needs to be explored.

reservation. Pinon, other conifers, cottonwoods, aspens, Russian olive, and other varieties of trees grow in abundance in these mountains. During the fall, the leaves on these trees blend into bands of red, yellow, gold, and brown which weave back and forth across the landscape, exactly in the sense of the writer's description --"millions of colors floating in the air."

Example A[1]: Autumn in the Mountains

Autumn is like a million of colors
floating in the air

For some readers -- especially those with school-related concerns in mind, the use of imagery here is overshadowed by other, more technical dimensions of the text. Particularly important in that regard is its shortness. The teacher asked the students to prepare a one-page composition on the topic, "Autumn in the Mountains;" the two line paragraph does not meet the basic expectations of this assignment.

However, brevity in this case does not necessarily result from any shortcoming on the writer's part. This writer has not prepared an exhaustive inventory of the features to be found on a trip into the mountains in fall. Instead, the writer has constructed an open-ended, image-rich scenario on the assigned theme, leaving readers ample room to fill in the outline with details and images of their own choosing. For the reading process to be successful in this instance, the reader has to supply that information and, thereby, become an active participant -- in effect, a co-author, in creation of text-meaning. Readers who are willing to work with the writer in this fashion will probably be quite pleased with the composition, whatever mechanical faults they may otherwise find in it. Readers unwilling to work in those terms -- who expect the

[1]Except when otherwise noted, the examples cited in this paper retain the spelling, capitalization, punctuation and line-by-line word arrangement of the original composition.

writer to hold exclusive responsibility for message-making and intend only to respond after the fact to the terms of that message, will quite likely feel shortchanged by their reading of this text.

Example B elicits a similar range of responses from readers, depending on their willingness (or reluctance) to be co-participants in message-making. This is an event-oriented text, not a descriptive/impressionistic one as was Example A. The detail of the story-line extends only to a certain point, then stops abruptly without bringing events to an expected closure. Papa Smurf falls into a cave, it becomes dark, other Smurfs are nearby, Papa Smurf hears the other Smurfs -- that much is clear. But is he rescued and does he get home safely? The text has no answer for these questions.

Example B: Smurfs in the Mountains

Papa smurph was in the forest.
He came to a cliff he didn't know what was
in front of him then he fell in a cave in the ground
It became dark when he herd the smurphs they were hoping
through the trees they were singing they were singing
lalalalala - lalalalala

While in residence at the elementary school, I discussed this situation with the author and with several other fourth grade Ute students. I was interested in determining if they saw any gaps in the narrative. Their responses were almost identical. They said, "This is a story about Smurfs." It did not take much discussion to show me that, in my haste to assess the story content, I had looked only at the words and word-choices and had ignored the assumptions which lay under them. Anyone who knows anything about the values system of Smurf-dom knows that Papa Smurf **has** to be rescued. A tragedy is simply not permitted within this domain.

The form of Example B anticipates the likelihood of a happy ending, even though the wording of the text appears to

have little to say on the matter. By recasting the organization of the narrative (see Example C) to show each event individually, the likelihood of a happy ending is made more apparent by studying the structural form of the text.

Example C: Smurfs in the Mountains

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1. Papa Smurph was in the forest
2. he came to a cliff
3. he didn't know what was in front of him
4. then he fell into a cave in the ground
5. it became dark
6. then he herd the smurphs
7. they were hoping through the trees
8. they were singing
9. they were singing lalalalala - lalalalala

The title identifies for the reader the actors, Smurfs, of the narrative. The first four lines introduces Papa Smurf and tells how he fell into danger. Lines 7-9 point out that other Smurfs are in the area. Line 5 completes the description of Papa Smurf's predicament, and line 6 provides the transition between segments, by linking references to Papa Smurf and "the smurphs."

The story is told from Papa Smurf's point of view, and an expectation is created that the Smurfs will come to Papa Smurf's aid. However, it remains the responsibility of readers to draw on the clues presented within the text and reach this conclusion on their own. Once again, written Ute English calls on the reader as well as the writer to be active participants in the message-making process.

Conclusions from Examples A and B

Three principles of written Ute English central to Examples A and B are:

1. non-exhaustive presentation of meaning

   Ute English writers can be selective in their use of description and narration, suggesting the full detail, without being obligated to present all of it within their compositions.

2. active engagement of the reader

   A non-exhaustive presentation of meaning has to involve the reader as well as the writer as co-particpants in the message-making process. The writer outlines the message, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps, construct necessary relationships between isolated details, and otherwise formalize the connections between segments of the narrative.

3. communicative value of text form

   How the writer organizes information within the narrative and arranges it on the page can be as important to the communication of message to the reader as are the factual details of that message.

These three principles are key to the design of the final composition discussed here, a fourth grade Ute student's response to her teacher's request for a one-page discussion of "My Favorite Animal" (see Example D). Unlike the instructions leading to examples A and B, in this assignment the teacher expected the student to take a position on the given topic and defend it. Example D meets the basic expectations of the assignment on first reading, which is not always the case with Ute English writers. But even here, the reader has to become an active participant in the creation of meaning. The writer never says directly "the eagle is my favorite animal." Very little of the student's personal opinion shows up in the wording of the essay. Many members of the Northern Ute tribe hold the eagle in special regard for much the same reasons as depicted in Example D. In addition, traditional Ute etiquette makes it inappropriate for speakers to assert individual opinions on some issues, especially when

other parties in the discussion hold different opinions. A more successful and valued approach focuses the discussion on the assumptions which all parties have in common with individual opinion being introduced only as it relates directly to one or more common themes.

Example D: The bold Eagle

Is pourt of the
indian nation. It is
an indian spirit. in Inain.
ways it brings messages
to all kinds like
a fire in the wood
and if. One of ther
people were in danger
or if someone ways
on. thre secret moound.

The effects of this custom show up frequently in oral Ute English contexts, and help explain non-standard uses of language. For example, a Ute adult asked "What do you want to do about this?" often answers, "I do not know." or avoids giving an opinion through silence. Recasting the question to inquire "What can we do....?" yields much more satisfactory, though more inclusive and not-personally focused responses (Leap, 1989).

In example D, the eagle is the writer's favorite animal because eagles are a favorite animal of Indian people as a whole. She values the eagle because its actions benefit all Indian people, not because of any outcomes which favor her individually. In other words, the statement of "personal opinion" presented through this essay is really an assertion of membership within her Tribe and of "place" within its traditions and teaching. The essay is not a *pro forma* response to a classroom assignment, and cannot be evaluated correctly in classroom-centered terms.

Unfortunately, most assessments of Ute student writing within school settings focus on technical and mechanical details rather than a broader socio-cultural context. The classroom-centered approach leads to comments such as the text contains no title (the caption in the original format is really the first three words of the first sentence). There is no topic sentence identifying the intended focus of the discussion. Instead, the text builds towards its central theme comment by comment, forcing the reader to infer the purpose of the composition from the **whole** text, not from the meaning of any single segment. Spelling errors and mistakes in punctuation distract the reader's attention from the text content and further weaken the effectiveness of the statement according to this line of reasoning.

However, to consider Example D merely a set of randomly or haphazardly arranged ideas, presented without regard to the conventions of standard written English greatly underestimates the craft which the writer invested in the construction of this essay. The writer's choice of content and use of point of view closely mirrors the expectations of "good etiquette" within Ute tradition. Similarly, the presentation of content is tightly organized, even if the organizing principles which the writer followed do not necessarily adhere to the "main topic/supporting topic" hierarchy which writers of English are expected to employ.

To explore the issue of organization further, Example E arranges the text so that each of its main ideas occurs on a separate line and normalizes spelling and punctuation to make it easier to follow the meaning of the text. The essay now appears to be composed of two segments, lines 1-3 and lines 4-6. From the point of view of text meaning, the relationship between the two segments is more than sequential. Lines 4-6 do not introduce new information so much as elaborate on information already presented in the preceding segment.

The repetition and elaboration is marked directly in the syntactic forms of these statements. Lines 4, 5, and 6 are composed of grammatically incomplete, therefore dependent, clause constructions in contrast to the complete, independent,

clauses found in lines 1, 2, and 3. Lines 4, 5, and 6 begin with conjunctions which link the statement it governs to the other statements which surround it. For these reasons, lines 4-6 can be said to be bound to the lines which precede them and can only be understood in relation to the first three lines.

Example E:

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1. The bald eagle is part of the Indian nation
2. it is an Indian spirit
3. in Indian ways it brings messages to all kinds
4. like a fire in the woods
5. and if one of the people were in danger
6. or if someone was on their secret mound.

The third line plays a key role as the main clause governing the subordinate, dependent grammatical constructions in lines 4-6. The pronoun in line three links it to line 2 which is similarly linked by a pronoun-referent chain to line 1. The overall relationship between the ideas of this essay is displayed in Example F. This relationship bears little resemblance to the ways in which standard English outlines organize meanings on the printed page. Rather than moving the reader through a series of linked ideas, each with its own set of supporting documentation, the organization of the essay "The Bold Eagle" in Example D reiterates a basic kernel of information, further refining and enriching the commentary each time the point is represented.

According to the display in Example F, the central theme of the essay is stated in line 1; here lies the kernel of information which is restated and refined in each of the following statements. However, the meaning of line 1 for the text as a whole can only be determined by reading the rest of the text. Considered by itself, line 1 anticipates very little of the discussion to come. This is why, central as it may be to the meaning of the text, in no sense can line 1 be considered the topic sentence.

Example F:

Line by line sequence	Idea by idea sequence
1	1
2	1a
3	1b
4	1b(1)
5	1b(2)
6	1b(3)

If any sentence is to be singled out in that regard, it would be line 3 which occupies a key position in the presentation of the message of the text. Line 3 links together the ideas of section 1, of which it is a part, and section 2, over which the line is dominant. The pivotal, transitional status of this line explains its irregular punctuation -- the use of the mid-sentence period, also found in lines 5 and 6 but not lines 1 or 2. Here is another instance where the form of a Ute English essay literally represents, and calls the readers attention to, the essay's message.

Summary

The intention of this paper was to explore the "writing needs" of Ute Indian students. Rather than assuming that these students had writing problems, I focused on the students' assumptions about writing and appropriate use of language in written contexts, traced the effects of these assumptions on particular writing tasks, and then reflected on what this showed me about these students' writing skills. This analysis has the following broader implications:

1. Contrary to what may be the impression upon initial reading, written Ute English compositions contain a high degree of structure, form, and organization. Though non-standard spelling, sentence forms, and the like occur

throughout these essays, choosing Ute English as the language of written discourse does not automatically result in texts which are haphazard descriptions or characterized by the writer's lack of writing skills. Written Ute English, like oral Ute English and all other forms of human language use, is rule governed. The rules in the examples discussed here include:

- non-exaustive presentation of meaning
- active engagement of the reader
- communicative value of text form
- shared points of view, not personal one, as the source for each essay's central theme.

Use of such rules may not be consistent with the principles governing standard English literature usage or consistent with the expectations which standard English speakers bring to the reading process, but there is structure and coherence in written Ute English all the same.

2. Ute students' use of this style of written English resembles the students' use of English in other classroom domains. The consistency of these students' "knowledge of language" and use of language across situation and task needs to be stressed, specifically the consistence between strategies governing language use within oral as well as written English. This situation is different than that of the Rio Grande pueblos (Wolfram et al, 1979) or Tohono O'Odham (Goodman, 1984) where relationships between oral and written English have been found to be much less closely aligned. At those sites, Indian writing needs can be handled as separate, independent issues within the school's language arts curriculum. In the Northern Ute case, classroom strategies which hope to move Ute students' written English in the direction of standard English models need to pay attention to oral as well as written language development and attempts to deal with these students' writing needs strictly as writing-centered problems will have only a limited effectiveness.

3. Written Ute English not only resembles oral Ute English usage, it also parallels in many ways the patterns of

oral discourse found within the students' ancestral language tradition. Few of these students are fluent speakers of Ute, and even fewer are fluent writers of that language. Yet, there is a sense in which writing in Ute English and using rules of grammar and discourse drawn from the Ute language tradition when doing so, contributes to the retention of ancestral language skills within this speech community, and gives a stronger foundation for the Northern Ute tribe's efforts at ancestral language renewal.

4. The tribal government, parents, and school authorities agree that improvement of written English skills needs to be a priority in the education of Ute Indian students. Whether eliminating fluency in Ute English needs to be part of this process is not nearly so self-evident. There is a danger as discussed in point three above that an outright revision of community based English skills could weaken the already limited extent of current Ute language use and reduce even further the prospects for effective Ute language renewal. Moreover, as the example essays reviewed in this paper have shown, there is a new tradition of written English taking shape at Northern Ute, the first steps toward a Ute-oriented style of English literature similar to that now seen among Tohono O'Odham, Hualapai, Navajo, and elsewhere. Just as they will want to do nothing to undermine continuity in Ute language fluency on this reservation, responsible educators will want to do all they can do to see this literary tradition continue to take root. Making certain that classroom-based language instruction does not undo tribal efforts toward language self-determination, in Ute as well as English, seems a reasonable strategy for educators to follow under these circumstances.

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